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The follow-up

Importance of "continuity" or follow up

P. José Vicente Nacher, C.M.

A priest asked his friend in whose parish a mission had just finished; "What did the mission leave behind?"

"And what happens after the Mission?" is also a question asked of us. It may seem a not-so important question to us, but there is no doubt that the future of the Popular Missions depends to a great degree on what the priests and pastoral agents see the effects of the Mission to be.

Popular Missions that have been well done and that end with satisfactory results for the places and people who requested the mission are the best promotion for new requests and the only goal that we can hope for. The Popular Missions are a service to the Church and as such, ought to be useful and show it! The popular mission does not exist just to be a popular mission: it responds to the objective of evangelization, and it is realized within a much wider pastoral context.

For this reason, outcomes are fundamental for the mission and we cannot leave them out in our serious planning for this ministry.

The questions we have asked ourselves and to which we try to respond¹ in this brief presentation are:

- + In the time after a mission, how responsible are the missionaries for the evangelical animation of the community?
- + What are the methods, materials, and dynamics that ought to be used in the follow up after the Mission?
- + Should the missionary team return? How often?
- + With so many various pastoral styles and concepts, is it possible to offer answers to the real needs of today's church?
- + Finally, how do we do an effective follow up?

Biblical and vincentian tradition

Just as God does not abandon his people, so pastors accompany their people along the road of faith. The apostle Paul himself maintained a fluid contact with those communities that he had evangelized: he was always aware of what was happening in them, he wrote to them and sent his collaborators. ..

¹We are using the experiences of the Provinces of Spain and Portugal that were presented in Valencia at the Interprovincial Meeting on Popular Mission Teams in 1994.

Vincent de Paul and the first missionaries not only left the *Charities* established in the communities where they'd given a Mission, but they organized a follow thru. Let us remember that even Louise de Marillac began her collaboration with Saint Vincent as a visitor with the Confraternities of Charity.

The years from 1940 until 1965, in Spain and other countries, were a time of enthusiasm for the Popular Missions. Many parishes, in accordance with Canon Law at the time, systematically had a mission every 10 years. In a certain way, this regularity of missions constituted a follow up of the mission. In many places, for example in our parishes, it would not be a bad idea to revive this custom.

Definition

In a group like this, with such a variety of experiences and processes, we have to clarify what we are referring to when we speak of *continuity, follow up, or post mission of the Popular Mission*. Among us, we are referring to the time right after the period of the few weeks when the Mission Team acts directly.

More concretely, we are concerned here with the continuity of the mission to the extent to which the missionaries are able to influence it: that is to say, anticipating it in the planning stage or designing it more completely during the Mission itself. This is to say that today, the follow up is part of the mission itself. For this reason, the missionary feels some responsibility for this part of the mission, too. This is brought about in conjunction with the ordinary responsible pastoral agents of the community.

We must not confuse *continuity of the mission* with renewal of the mission, or simply the upkeep of some groups begun during the mission. The idea of continuity makes reference to some objectives of the mission (missionary dynamics, style, message, group, lay ministries, services...) toward which the Mission worked. Therefore, it would make the Mission more effective if from the preparation period there be some broad objectives that focus on continuity or follow up.

In a special way, the Popular Mission itself is a part of the endurance of ordinary pastoral work. The continuity is inserted into the overall pastoral task, and energizes and supports its ultimate pastoral goals. During the follow up to the mission, the faithful of the community certainly must assume the challenging mind set of the missionary. As a consequence, this is when parish confirms itself as permanently missionary in all its actions and structures.

In simple words, we can say that if the Popular Mission means *evangelization, communion, reconciliation, proclamation, insight, commitment to the poor...then:*

The follow up to the mission must include perseverance and development of these very same elements (evangelization, union, etc.) actively taken up by the Christian community that has had a Mission.

Finally, as we try to further clarify concepts, let us remain clear as to what we think the follow up of the mission should **not** be:

- * it should not be something cosmetic left in the parish to cover deficiencies;
- * it should not necessarily be a direct increase in participation in the sacraments;
- * it should not be something permanent that allows the pastor to work less;

* it should not be just a warm memory that has no effect on the hearts of the faithful or on ordinary pastoral activity.

Experiences, proofs, opinions.

What do the pastors who've had a mission say about the mission?:

In a questionnaire done three years ago in parishes that had had a Popular Mission, we discovered the specific values that the pastors give to the post-mission. They do not consider it the single most essential element when you look at the whole total picture. Their dominant idea is that the post mission is as important as every other phase of the Mission

When asked about the repercussions of the Mission on parish life, no one said that the results were nothing or very little, even though some said it was superficial. The majority of the pastors gave high marks to the Mission as very **significant**, that is to say, the Mission left behind a lasting and varied influence.

Of all the more or less concrete realities that continued as results of the mission, **the pastors** valued most the creation of new groups in the parish (for the elderly, married couples, adult education, etc.)

Frequently, the *family communities, encounter groups, and parish assemblies* begun during the mission continued to meet. There has been disproportionately more continuity in urban parishes than in the very small villages, where it is difficult to find *prepared personnel* to take on the roles of moderators or animators. In some cases, the priest himself has to give the Family Catechesis in homes. In some other places, while the difficulty of meeting in the houses was overcome during the mission, the same problem surfaced afterwards and impeded the dynamic of the small groups.

In certain determined parishes, the pastors themselves testify that the active participation of the lay people increased and they noticed an increase in the interest in evangelization in the parish itself.

While in some parishes there was a notable increase in the number of people participating in the parish devotions, in others there was not much change.

In the follow up, the Family Communities, for their particular dynamic, need some material prepared especially for them. Sometimes, they use materials offered by the missionaries, and at other times, they use materials that they themselves have developed according to their own style, and sometimes they use the adult education programs of the Diocese.

Consulting with the pastors about the possibility of a return engagement of the missionaries (Renewal of the Mission), the answers are varied, reflecting their experiences, we think. Some see our return as not necessary, and some ask for us the next or second year. The majority think it is enough if the pastor asks for a mission. They do not want to close their doors, but neither do they want to go to extremes. We've noticed that if the pastors really desire the help (or need it), they'd rather work it so they get no more pressure than they want.

Some propose a repetition of the mission every ten years, as used to be done. There are some who suggest follow up visits of the missionaries not only as friends, but as evangelizers.

The local churches place in the Popular Mission their great hope for the renewal of the parish, especially for the return of those who have fallen away from the church. The follow up ought to be integrated into the appropriate parish and diocesan guidelines as is the entire Popular Mission.

What do our missionaries think:²

We admit that the post mission or follow up is still the weakest part of the mission. We should be doing it, but, because it is basically part of ordinary pastoral work, we think this is properly the initiative of the pastor who has to coordinate all the activity that takes place after the mission. Let it never be said that we pretended to substitute for him in this role.

In some missions, after a few years, the Family Communities we formed have not only persevered, but New Communities have grown out of them. But most often there is a gradual decrease, even to the point of dissolution three or four years later.

In other places, the key to the continuity of the mission has rested with the young married group formed during the Popular Mission.

You have to try to foresee how the different groups which continue after the mission incorporate themselves into parish life and enrich it. Those who have encountered the Lord for the first time during the Mission, and those who have returned to the Lord, need special attention so they can adequately nourish themselves in their new awareness.

In general, we have noticed that long-lasting effects depend very much on the preparation and enthusiasm of the moderators of the Family Communities. The missionaries testify that the post mission is pre-determined by our first steps in the preparation period.

Follow up is easier where there is a clear community project. Where this does not exist, we know of no substitute that can provide continuity. There is always a need for people in the parish to concern themselves specifically with this ministry.

We have noticed a better understanding among the people of what the parish is after the mission. There are always some who become very actively involved in collaboration with us. During the follow up, team work gets strengthened.

And there have been times when the priests themselves experienced a great renewal of their spirit and pastoral dreams.

² Based on the experiences of the Teams of the Provinces of Spain and Portugal.

Some difficulties

Difficulties expressed by the pastors

Loss of enthusiasm is one of the principle difficulties we find in the parishes during the follow up. The enthusiasm that worked so well during the mission lasted just a short time. Some of the *returned fallen away* go back to being *fallen away*. Those who were very involved *go back to their regular duties and can't do any more*. The pastor goes back to feeling alone without the support of the missionaries. With their expression "*it lacks strength*," the pastors indicate the feeling that the mission did not achieve its purpose -- it wanted to but could not, because it lacked sufficient people to continue the mission. There is a clear need and real priority to form pastoral agents.

Some expressed a need for adequate materials, although some provinces are very advanced in this regard. The suggestions of the missionaries need to be more concrete.

Difficulties that the missionaries experience:

For the Missionaries, the **pre-mission** foretells what the follow up will be like. During the mission, the Missionary Team can work to repair deficiencies in the preparation; but after the mission, the errors made in the pre-mission can reappear.

Another practical difficulty is that the majority of the Provincial Mission Teams cannot do a follow up simply because they do not have enough time. The calendar fills up with this year's missions and up-coming pre-missions. Planning the follow up is very important and should be done, but it depends on the actual time the missionaries have to dedicate to it. We really need to have missionaries especially dedicated to follow up.

And the priests themselves are, in some cases, the impediment to a good follow up. This won't surprise any of you. Sometimes the problem is passivity: the necessary steps don't get done to organize and animate. Other times, the priests simply do not want to change anything they had before, and prefer to continue exactly as things were. In some cases, the Mission just becomes a story to tell.

In many cases, there is not enough pastoral staff to provide leadership for new groups, so you get a new youth group without a youth director, married couples without advisors, Family Communities without a sufficient number of moderators, or without anyone to prepare them... Usually, the persons best suited for this work are overburdened with many pastoral obligations even before the mission begins. Once again, we repeat, **the priority is to identify and form pastoral agents!!!**

Some options for follow up:

1) The first option, which can seem to be the simplest for us, **is not to have a post-mission**. As soon as the missionary team concludes their work, the team says goodbye and the regular parish workers assume the responsibility of doing whatever will follow the Popular Mission. Or to put it another way, they resume their previous

tasks - but with some quantity and quality changes from the mission. This choice would be based on the conviction that it is these people who now will take care of their own evangelization.

2) Other choices, on the other hand, not only anticipate a follow up, but see the Popular Mission designed and developed in three phases that are done over three consecutive years. This would be, so to speak, like three missions one after another, with a single plan organized to go on for a long time.

3) A more radical option is to accept the responsibility for the parish from the bishop for two or three years. During this time the parish would be in a state of permanent mission. When the contract is fulfilled, we'd leave the parish, hopefully completely renewed. However, this is a type of Popular Mission that has its own difficulties.

4) The renewal of the mission (see Appendix I) is the most frequent. The Mission Team returns to the community where they gave a mission, generally the following year, for a short period of time - three days or a week - to revise, reanimate and renew the Popular Mission.

This might include: an evaluation meeting with the pastor and the moderators of the Family Communities; a convocation (for about three days) of the Family Communities that were functioning during the mission, including those that have not persevered; prayer and daily Eucharist; visits to the sick in the homes; youth meetings; celebrations with the children; Mass in the Communities. Different experiences and distinct objectives are possible.

5) In "Large Area Missions" there might be zones or parishes that were not affected by the Mission. It would be good sometime later to give another Popular Mission in that place, perhaps trying to correct previous errors or concentrate on those aspects that remained weak in the first attempt.

6) Sometimes, the bond that ties the missionaries to the parish is the "**special moments**" they shared. These can include important festivals of the parish or some special events in the schedule of activities. We can try to rekindle something of the **spirit that was lived and felt during the mission**. A type of personal friendship can exist with a community left behind where the missionaries have given a Mission.

7) There are those who, from the very beginning of the mission, present a **detailed plan (see Appendix 2)** of the content and strategies for a follow up that should be considered part of the activities that the parish and the Missionary Team have mutually committed themselves to. The missionaries return:

- in one month, for an evaluation of the mission and planning of the post-mission;
- in six months, to convoke a gathering of the Family Communities; and
- in one year, to do a renewal of the mission.

8) Some of you do Missions of various lengths, but I do not know much about them. I await your input.

Proposals

For the benefits of the Popular Mission to last a long time, the most important thing is that all the members of the parish become convinced of the importance of

evangelization and that they focus all their different activities and organizations on this goal. Long after the missionaries have gone this focus should remain, and include an explicit recall of the mission.

These various proposals and suggestions are made here to help do just that. And remember, in one way or other, they have been used, although separately, in various places:

- The follow up [who'll do it, how, when, dynamics, initiatives, places) should be planned before the end of the main part of the mission. The missionaries and the priest ought to be in agreement about this, even before the main part of the mission.

A detailed plan ought to take into account:

- the necessary steps and the time needed.
- the persons in charge of each new task.
- regularity of the meetings.
- materials and other supplies to be used.
- plan ahead to the next visit [or not] by the missionaries.
- who will be in charge of preparing the moderators?
- parish assemblies.
- who convokes, and when are, the Family Communities meeting?
- celebrations during the main part of the mission with the Family Communities.
- evaluations of the mission and the follow up.
- convoking the people who have volunteered to collaborate in the commitment of the missions.
- forming and leaving behind, at the end of the mission, the *Permanent Evangelization Team* (replacing the *Parish Mission Counsel* which functioned during the preparation for and the mission itself.)

Every parish should have a Permanent Evangelization Team, which can be formed in part by the members of the Parish Mission Council.

This Evangelization Team is different than the Parish Council or any other group or movement in the parish. Its purposes are the following:

- to be concerned that the parish is an evangelizing parish in every possible way.
- that it is a **missionary parish**.
- to be the "missionary conscience" of the parish.
- to generate new initiatives of evangelization.
- to be the pastoral outreach to the fallen away.
- to be concerned for the perseverance of the Family Communities.
- to maintain and develop the input of the Popular Mission that will enrich the parish.
- to care for the collaboration with the Foreign Missions.

+ Although it has been mentioned before, we insist on the importance of an adequate formation of pastoral agents and preparation of materials.

- + As in all areas of life, those little **"human details"** are very important, such as: writing letters to the Family Communities (Christmas Time), visiting the priests, attending some of the parish festivals...
- + To unite this work with another principle end of the Congregation of the Mission, it would be very good to gather all the priests that were involved in our Missions every once in a while to have a retreat, or simply a gathering, or an evaluation meeting.
- + To empowering their new consciousness of Mission, ask their prayers for new Missions, and to collaborate in new ministries.

APPENDIX 1

Mission renewal (three days)

Thursday

Arrival of the missionaries:
Meeting with the Pastoral Agents,
Family Communities

Friday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick
Family Communities
Youth

Saturday

Prayer
Visit the sick
Children
Marriages

Sunday

Mass with the Family Communities
(Parish Assembly)
A common sharing

Mission renewal (one week)

Sunday

Beginning of the renewal in the parish Mass
Meeting with the Pastoral Agents

Monday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick

Preparation of moderators
Children

Tuesday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick
Family Communities
Youth (up to 18 years)

Wednesday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick
Family Communities
Youth (up to 18 years)

Thursday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick
Family Communities
Couples

Friday

Prayer and Mass
Visit the sick
Penitential Celebration
Youth (over 18 years)

Saturday

Prayer
Childrens' Party
Youth Vigil

Sunday

Mass with the Christian Family Communities
A common sharing

APPENDIX 2

A plan for continuity or follow up (A proposal)

The Follow Up should be planned at the time of preparation for the mission. These planning sessions should include the pastor and his Pastoral Council (who will actually do the follow up), and the missionaries (who contribute their experience) .

1. The continuity of the Mission binds all the members of the parish. Together with the pastor, Mr. ----- will be responsible for:

- -----
- -----

2. As a result of the necessity for evangelization we have committed ourselves to during the Popular Mission, our Permanent Evangelization Team consists of the following members:

- ----- - -----

3. Finishing the mission, there will be an evaluation meeting with the Pastoral Council and the Missionary Team.

4. During the two weeks after the mission ends, the Parish Pastoral Council will meet to:

- * evaluate the Popular Mission and inform the Mission Team of its conclusions.
- * dissolve the Mission Council and create a Permanent Evangelization Team.
- * begin the initiatives suggested during the mission.
- * after a few days, convoke the Family Assemblies.
- * apply to the regular pastoral activity (sacraments, catechetics, ministry to the sick, marriages...) the new ideas that the Mission may have contributed in these areas.
- * study any new initiatives that might strengthen the evangelical dynamic of the parish.
- * determine who will be responsible for the preparation of moderators of the Family Communities.

5. During the important times of the liturgical year, Celebration Assemblies of the Family Communities should be convoked.

6. After a year, there should be a Renewal of the Mission.

English Translation: Arthur Kolinsky, C.M.